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Spiritans Interreligious Dialogue in India



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Introduction

India is the cradle of five major religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Bahai) and a habitat of almost all the faith traditions in the world. The cultural history of the sub-continent is, by and large, a remarkable record of peaceful cohabitation of different religious groups. However, dialogue among the different faith traditions is a relatively new experience which has become a visible religious practice in the recent few decades. Moreover, it will not be an exaggeration to say that inter-faith dialogue became prevalent and popular thanks to the initiatives of the Catholic Church after Vatican II.

We Spiritans are immersed in this context of the Indian reality since 2011. We cannot say that we are totally engaged in the interreligious dialogue, but through the dialogue of life we share this reality. Our apostolate connects us with people from different religions. Whether in hospital ministry, in the ministry of the mentally retarded children in special schools, ministry with the elderly people with handicaps, we are deeply connected to the multiple aspects of the Indian cultures and traditions. It is through the encounter of the other that we engage ourselves in a dialogue of life. We live in a milieu whereby we are in connection with Muslims and Hindus and people from other faiths. We share their griefs and we do our best to have a fraternal attitude towards them. Our presence in this milieu is itself a sign that we are eager to live among people from different backgrounds and religions. Let us not forget that in India the caste system constitutes a barrier in the society and it also interferes in every religion.

Areas of Reception

THEOLOGICAL RECEPTION

The positive attitude of the Council towards other faiths enhanced Indian theologians and pioneers of dialogue to elaborate a theology of dialogue proper to their contexts. In 1989, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India Commission for Dialogue and Ecumenism brought out the '*Guidelines for Inter-religious Dialogue*,' a unique text that explains the *raison d'être* and dynamism of dialogue ministry. According to this document, "dialogue is both an attitude and an activity of committed followers of various religions who agree to meet and accept one another and work together for common ideals in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. They do not meet in a superficial manner, leaving aside their religious convictions. Rather they reach out for each other from the very core of their respective faiths, for they are confident that not only what they have in common, but also those things in which they differ, can provide a motive for coming together."

The Commission also elaborates the attitudes for genuine dialogue. They are:

- Prayer
- Commitment to faith
- Willingness to change
- Truthfulness
- Honesty
- Humility
- Spirit of forgiveness
- Knowledge of the other
- Sense of justice.

The dangers to be avoided in the mission of dialogue are:

- Unwillingness to accept the other as different
- Attitude of suspicion
- Desire to score a point over the other
- Syncretism
- Indifferentism.

The theology of dialogue developed in India can be traced also from the statements of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Annual Meetings of the Indian Theological Association. These meetings define dialogue

as a mode of being and a way of life. It is a sharing and a process of mutual enrichment. Like all realities dialogue also contains a paradox: commitment to

one's own ideals and acceptance of others. Genuine dialogue implies that the partners respect one another and learn from one another. Hence there can be no dialogue without accepting the equality of partners. No religion can exist in isolation; nay more, a religion that is not open to the other becomes irreligious. In a pluralistic society to be religious is to be inter-religious.

INCULTURATION

The process of inculturation got momentum immediately after the Vatican Council. The liturgy began to be celebrated in the vernacular languages. In many places, churches and chapels were constructed in Indian style. Indian music, bhajans, and dance were introduced into liturgy. Oil lamps replaced candles and *arati* took the place of the thurible in worship. Priests, religious, and seminarians became interested in studying Indian spirituality and yoga. Christian ashrams sprang up in different corners of the country. But these days, a sort of frozenness has stalled indigenization, partly due to the disciplinary guidelines from different ecclesial corners.

RECEPTION VIA PRAXIS

The supporters of dialogue began *ashrams* and centers in various parts of the country to promote interaction among the believers of religions. The main activities of such centers are the following.

- Monthly meeting
- Seminars
- Experience sharing
- Celebration of festivals
- Common pilgrimage.

CO-OPERATION IN THE SOCIAL FIELD

Common activities by members of different religions are a form of interreligious dialogue. Certain dialogue units undertake public services in view of nation building. Some others take up a wide range of issues pertaining to human rights and freedom of the backward people in the country. The activists of dialogue engage also in exorcizing the demons of casteism, regionalism, and communalism. Through these sorts of action-oriented programs, people come to know about the liberative drive of religions and look to religions to solve the issues of life.

LIVE-TOGETHER SESSIONS

The live-in programs are those in which members of different religions come together for some days of staying together. They are arranged in quiet and beautiful places. During these days the participants meditate, sing, eat, and conduct sat-sang as one community. Dialogue goes to the deepest level when the members live together in proximity for days through prayer, contemplation, cooking and eating, discussion and cultural activities.

Evaluation of the Reception

A majority of the bishops in India attest to the positive and open attitude of the Vatican Council towards other religions. Since pluralism has become an irreversible fact of today's culture, they recognize in public other religions as ways of salvation to their respective believers. This position is closer to the theology of salvific grace, a position held by Karl Rahner. But when the ecclesial authorities speak within the board of Christians, they may be content with the theology of accomplishment, i.e., all religions are natural religions and Christianity is the supernatural religion.

Coming to the laity, they are not very much worried about the dogmatic formulations regarding dialogue. What matters to them is the praxis of dialogue. The relation of Christians towards other believers in India depends on various factors. Among them we will mention only two here.

a) *The antiquity, numerical strength, and economic status of Christians in a region.* For example, where Christians are numerically weak, they go for healthy relationship with others, while in areas where Christians have considerable strength, they are reluctant to accept cultural integration. Since they can stand on their own legs, they will not be ready to make any sacrifice for the sake of dialogue.

b) *Christian involvement in dialogue may vary also according to the forms of dialogue.* Laity feel at ease with the "dialogue of life" and the "dialogue of action," if the Hindus in the region are not averse to such initiatives. But they are not very much disposed to the dialogue of prayer. Joining other believers in worship seems to be disastrous for their faith, because reverence shown to Hindu deities is equal to idolatry for them.

Problems and Challenges

- Dialogue considered as a waste of time.
- Fear of the Catholics.
- The idea of superiority.
- Inculturation seen as a way to convert people.

Concluding Remarks

Problems are many for those on the path of dialogue. But we cannot abandon this mission, for it is one of the essential constituents of evangelization today. In this concluding part, I would like to make two suggestions, which may strengthen the mission of dialogue.

a) The basic requirement for the success of interreligious initiatives of the church is to have Catholics with genuine spirituality. Spirituality is the only uniting factor in the world. Anything

without God creates division. Wealth, power, and fame are making people more self-centered and competitive. The mission of dialogue will flourish only with the increase of faithful interested in the spiritual quest. People with a spiritual outlook will never question the usefulness of dialogue. The Jesuit, George Gispert Sauch, once asked, "What profit do I obtain from the experience of dialogue?" He answered that the main fruit was that we are enabled to love believers of other faiths more deeply. We know them precisely in the way that they are different from us. The mystery of dialogue is that in accepting and affirming difference we come closer to people. Our experiences of dialogue lead us to the very mystery of God.

b) Another necessary element for the betterment of the dialogue ministry is that Christians recognize the identity of other faiths. If Christians perceive themselves as superior to other ways of salvation, it will endanger the spirit of interreligious fellowship. Accepting in others only that which is Christian and rejecting the rest, is equal to denying their alterity. The participants have to constantly purify the motives behind dialogue initiatives. Christians must recognize in other revelations some irreducible elements which are unknown to Christianity. This does not mean that those who engage in dialogue cannot take up a definite stand regarding their own faith. Commitment to one's own faith is not an obstacle to dialogue, if the person is ready to award the same right to others. What endangers dialogue is the triumphant attitude saying, "ours is the only true religion and others are false."

Any religion without dialogue has the potential danger of alienation. Alienation breeds non-communication, and non-communication leads to communalism. In dialogue, partners are called to be at the service of God who transcends all religions. Pope John Paul II understood dialogue as a sign of the hope that religions of the world were becoming more aware of their shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family. As Missionary of Africa, Bernard Ugeux, put it, "to turn towards the believer of another religion with respect to learn how to understand him and to discover the values that make him live, is to reproduce concretely the attitude that Jesus Christ always sought to promote in his encounter with people."

Proposals for the Congregation

- include the dialogue perspective with other religion in the formation process;
- send our seminarians to a pluralistic context for missionary experience;
- encourage Spiritans to work hand in hand with partners from other religions in the social field.